

Reflections on the diversity of participation in language documentation

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In this paper, I reflect on the diversity of participation in language documentation in the Indonesian context over the past two decades. I show that progress has been made in documentation research on the minority languages, with the concerted efforts of different stakeholders (community/non-community—among the latter, affiliations with universities, non-governmental organizations, the government, and other types of organizations of local speech communities). However, challenging issues remain in relation to the local communities' capacity, motivation, and leadership for helpful and long-term active participation in language documentation.

1. Introduction On this twentieth anniversary of Nikolaus Himmelmann's (1998) seminal article "Documentary and Descriptive Linguistics," I reflect on the diversity of participation in language documentation, mainly based on my experience in the Indonesian context.¹ Over the past two decades, much language documentation has been driven by the urgency of documenting endangered (typically minority) languages. Therefore, I begin my reflections by examining the participation of these targeted speech communities in the documentation process and discussing their roles and the extent of their contributions. I then reflect on the nature of the contributions of other stakeholders, such as the academic community, governmental institutions, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Finally, I summarize the issues raised and provide my personal assessment of the prospect of improving the participation of local communities in the Indonesian context and beyond.

¹I thank two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and feedback. I am also grateful to the editors for their invitation to contribute to this special volume in commemoration of the twentieth anniversary of Nikolaus Himmelmann's seminal article *Documentary and Descriptive Linguistics*.

2. Minority languages and participation of the speech community By minority languages, I mean the languages spoken by relatively small speech communities. The term “minority” is a relative notion, defined in terms of size and (in)equality in power and opportunities compared with the more dominant groups in a given geographical space. Speech communities with less than 1,000 members can definitely be considered minority groups in Indonesia. Based on this definition, 188 local minority languages exist in Indonesia (i.e., 34% of the total number of languages) (Arka 2013). In the ensuing discussion, I reflect largely on the participation of local minority communities in the documentation of their languages, which are either highly endangered, such as Marori in Merauke, Papua (119 people, with a dozen fluent speakers), or increasingly marginalized (though not yet endangered), such as Rongga in Flores (Arka 2010, 2015). Most, if not all, of Indonesia’s 188 minority languages would be considered endangered (cf. Anderbeck 2015).

The participation of local speech communities in documenting their languages is essential in any context. It can range from a simple role, such as giving permission (e.g., by a clan leader), to more complex tasks, such as participation in recorded speech events and other activities requiring specific or expert knowledge and skills (e.g., doing transcription using certain software tools, such as ELAN²). The participation can be light and casual, but it can also be intense and active. In most cases in the Indonesian context, community members tend to avoid intense involvement in language documentation and maintenance programs because such active participation often requires a high degree of motivation and a relatively high level of education, skills, and literacy to carry out documentation tasks. In modern language documentation, data collection and processing (transcription, helping with metadata, etc.) require community members’ literacy in using digital tools, such as video recorders and laptop computers. Furthermore, practical-educational work (e.g., developing learning materials for local schools) calls for basic knowledge of pedagogy and curriculum design. Seeking ongoing financial support for documentation projects demands skills in project proposal writing and access to possible funding networks at all levels, from local, regional, and national to international. In the contexts where I have worked, such requirements are too stringent to be met by local minority community members.^{3,4}

The primary concerns of many speech community members worldwide often involve meeting their basic needs—how to survive on a daily basis (e.g., food, housing, day-to-day finances, and jobs)—rather than the fate of their native languages. When day-to-day survival is a pressing concern, the motivation to participate in language documentation and maintenance can thus be low; nonetheless, many community members in such situations are happy to participate if paid to do so. The issue of long-term financial

²<https://tla.mpi.nl/tools/tla-tools/elan/>

³However, a local can acquire such qualities, typically after a process of capacity building and mentoring, provided that researchers are fortunate enough to have at least one capable local. For my Endangered Languages Documentation Programme (ELDP)-funded documentation project (<http://meraukelanguages.org/>), I have been fortunate to be assisted by Mr. Agus Mahuze, a highly motivated and capable young Marori, who happens to have a university education. With training and constant help, he has managed to acquire skills in data collection, data processing, and more importantly, develop further networks of his own for language documentation and language advocacy in Merauke.

⁴However, the reviewers point out that this is a highly context-dependent issue. In the North American context, many community language programs are directed by members of local speech communities, with and without academic training as linguists. Funding agencies have increasingly adapted their processes to facilitate funding provided directly to community-based organizations rather than academic researchers (cf. First Peoples’ Cultural Council. <http://www.fpcc.ca/email/email02201802.aspx>).

support for any project concerning language documentation and maintenance of minority languages remains a concern. The issue of motivation, particularly motivated leadership, can be one of the most difficult aspects of any community-based documentation project. For such a documentation enterprise to be successful and sustainable, at least one highly motivated local leader (if not a group of leaders) in the community must be willing to dedicate one's time and effort to documentation activities. I reflect more on the motivation issue in the final section of this paper.

3. Participation of the academic community As conceived by Himmelmann (1998), modern language documentation is essentially an academic enterprise in the field of linguistics. Unsurprisingly, most contributions to the growth of language documentation over the last two decades have come from the academic community, particularly linguists. These academics often collaborate with groups from other disciplines, such as ethnobiologists, ethnomusicologists, biologists, and computer scientists. All eighteen language documentation projects in Indonesia, funded by the Endangered Languages Documentation Programme (ELDP)⁵ and the Documentation of Endangered Languages (DOBES),⁶ over the past two decades have been undertaken by academics and students of linguistics.

Academics—either individually or collectively through their institutions and professional societies—have played pivotal roles in advancing the rapidly developing field of language documentation. The field has benefited greatly from the participation and contributions of different experts, including descriptive-typological linguists, sociolinguists, computer scientists, anthropologists, biologists, and ethnobiologists, as well as from the expertise of non-academic contributors, within and beyond the community. Linguistic programs now offer courses and even degrees in language documentation. Academics have also established publication outlets that are specifically intended for language documentation, for example, *Language Documentation and Conservation* (LDC)⁷ and *Language Documentation and Description* (LDD)⁸. Professional organizations, such as the Linguistic Society of America, initiate activities and provide platforms for scholars involved in documenting and archiving endangered languages to discuss and share solutions and intellectual advances in this new field (e.g., as documented in Grenoble and Furbee 2010). Conferences and workshops on language documentation are regularly organized (e.g., the bi-annual International Conference on Language Documentation and Conservation at the University of Hawaii), where commonly discussed academic topics include the creation and the use of various archival corpora, strategies for language maintenance/revival, interdisciplinary approaches to language documentation, technological advances in developing and using corpora, and promising directions for collaborative research. The above-mentioned concerted efforts of academics across different fronts have made language documentation a fast-developing field over the past two decades.

Academics are also the most active groups directly working with local communities in documenting their languages; equally important, they provide support for these activities. Based on my experience in documenting endangered languages in the Indonesian context, such support requires expertise in fields beyond linguistics because real issues in the field are multidimensional and often rooted in and mixed with complex

⁵<http://www.eldp.net>

⁶<http://dobes.mpi.nl>

⁷<http://nflrc.hawaii.edu/lcd/>

⁸<http://www.elpublishing.org/publications>

socioecological problems (Arka 2005, 2008, 2013). These problems include difficulty in obtaining permission, power struggles and rivalry among community members or clans, and challenges encountered in convincing locals that language documentation as part of language maintenance is worth doing. Many academics involved in language documentation have been impacted by working closely with communities and have developed an understanding of the necessity of collaborative work within and beyond academic disciplines to respond adequately to the forces that create language shifts and endangerment.

Examining the affiliation of academic participation in language documentation in Indonesia shows an imbalance—most modern language documentation projects have been funded and led by foreigners. This situation is mainly due to funding bodies being based in developed countries, such as the United Kingdom and Germany, and grants being highly competitive internationally. Few Indonesian academics have applied for grants, and even fewer have managed to win them. This issue highlights the need for capacity building at both national and local levels in Indonesia. The increased diversity of practitioners of language documentation will guard against ethnocentric/Eurocentric myopias or biases and lead to better overall documentation of all languages.

4. Participation of governmental institutions Governmental participation in minority language documentation is often part of larger initiatives mandated by constitutions, legal acts, or charters. In this section, I reflect on the case of the Indonesian government's participation in the context of language policy and language management. Indonesia's 1945 constitution stipulates that local languages and cultures should be respected and maintained. The Department of Education and Cultures has therefore issued a series of ministerial decrees, resulting in the formation of what is now known as *Badan Pengembangan dan Pembinaan Bahasa* (National Board for Language Development and Cultivation) or *Badan Bahasa* for short.⁹

However, issues related to local languages are politically sensitive in Indonesia and dealt with as part of the broader national strategic language planning or language management efforts (Arka 2013; Moeliono 1994; Spolsky 2009). While *Badan Bahasa* assumes some responsibility for the documentation of local languages, as mandated by the 1945 constitution, a great deal of its time, effort, and resources has been devoted to the research on and the development of Bahasa Indonesia as a modern unifying language. The government's excessive emphasis on the unifying function of the national language, especially under President Suharto's regime from the 1970s to the 1990s, has caused negative unintended consequences for minority local languages across Indonesia.

An investigation on the publications of *Badan Bahasa* reveals the relative lack of attention to local languages (Arka 2013). For example, during the 1975–2007 period, 1,556 works were published, with only a third relating to local vernacular languages. Most publications focused on the healthy major languages, with Javanese topping the list (14.3%). The minority languages of eastern Indonesia received the least attention, with those in West Papua and Maluku having a 1:1 ratio (i.e., one language with one publication) or no publication at all. Many of the languages in this region are under-documented or undocumented and in urgent need of documentation.

After the fall of Suharto, Indonesia emerged as one of the most democratic countries in Asia. Local governments were granted greater autonomy, and West Papua was

⁹For the history of the different names of Badan Bahasa, see <http://badanbahasa.kemdikbud.go.id/lamanbahasa/sejarah>.

granted special autonomy status. Importantly, local languages—including teaching them as part of the Muatan Lokal (MULOK, meaning local-content curriculum)—are now the responsibilities of the local governments, as stipulated by the autonomy laws (Law 22/1999 on Local Autonomy and 2001 on Special Autonomy) and the law on languages (Law 24/2009). However, because of the politics of language in Indonesia, the ongoing tensions between the central and the local governments over the control of resources, as well as the lack of local capacity to handle the specialized tasks involved in dealing with local languages, I expect neither a radical change in the attention paid to minority local languages nor a significant increase in the resources devoted to them, especially in eastern Indonesia (see Arka 2013 for details). Little has changed in this respect since Indonesia embarked on its “big bang” decentralization or regional autonomy in 2001 although there is evidence that local autonomy has worked in certain other respects (see Hill 2014 for details).

My field experience suggests that while local autonomy may bring more freedom for locals to manage their own affairs, groups that are minorities in their own regions are still disadvantaged because the resources and the local language policies are controlled by the locally dominant groups. For example, in collaboration with the local Rongga teacher, I developed the MULOK teaching material as part of my ELDP-funded documentation of Rongga (2004–2006). However, this teacher had an issue with using the material in class because of the policy that Rongga students must be taught the dominant Manggarai language as the MULOK. As the curriculum and the timetable were already crowded, no time slot was available for teaching Rongga. Similar issues have arisen elsewhere in Indonesia. For example, in my documentation work with the minority Marori people in Merauke, Indonesian Papua, I observed that such inequality disadvantaged this group and violated the UN’s Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights. Such inequality raises the need for external or higher-level governmental intervention and regulation to ensure that minority groups have access to the range of resources and support that they need to maintain their languages and cultures.

5. Participation of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) A number of NGOs are engaged in language and cultural documentation as part of their missions and activities. A well-known one is the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL International),¹⁰ which operates in the areas of research, training, and language material development. In Indonesia, the SIL has produced 1,383 publications (at the time of this writing), whose five leading domains covered are linguistic documentation (32.9%), language assessments (9.8%), anthropology (8.6%), sociolinguistics (5.6%), and literacy and education (3.3%).¹¹ The SIL has also conducted training workshops on language documentation in collaboration with universities and the government, particularly the Department of Education.

Historically, the SIL’s work in Indonesia has been related to the translation of the Bible as part of its Christian mission (Aritonang and Steenbrink 2008). The mixing of linguistic documentation with Christian missionary work has raised concerns in parts of Moslem-dominated Indonesia in recent years. These issues have resulted in the SIL’s difficulty in extending its permit to operate in Indonesia. Although it has been forced to close many of its branch offices across the country, the SIL staff members have continued their language

¹⁰<https://www.sil.org/about>

¹¹<https://www.sil.org/resources/search/country/Indonesia>. Accessed April 22, 2018.

documentation work in parts of Indonesia, including (West) Papua. The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) is another NGO engaged in documentation work in Indonesia. Its function that is related to local literacy and language documentation is part of its broader mission to maintain biodiversity and human ecology. My ELDP-funded ethnobiological documentation project on the Marori in Merauke (<http://meraukelanguages.org>) was carried out in collaboration with the local WWF.

Additionally, some smaller NGOs focus on individual local languages, for example, BASAbali (<http://basabali.org/?lang=bl>) in Bali. Its innovative approach to language conservation has attracted international attention, and it won the International Linguapax Award in 2018, in conjunction with International Mother Language Day. While targeting the Balinese language, BASAbali was in fact neither initiated nor directed by a Balinese. Nonetheless, its activities involve local language activists. BASAbali is “a collaboration of linguists, anthropologists, students and laypeople, from within and outside of Bali, who are collaborating to keep Balinese strong and sustainable.” International collaboration on this local project has proven to be successful, providing a fruitful model for the conservation of other local languages in Indonesia and beyond.

6. Final remarks: challenges and prospects In this final section, I reflect a little more on the contributions of local communities. If the success of language documentation is measured by not only the amount of rich, multipurpose, and multimedia datasets collected and processed but also its local impact, namely, the extent to which such documentation triggers the community’s awareness of its significance (e.g., for language maintenance), then considerable time and effort should be devoted to increasing the active participation of the local community. Given these goals, the major challenge of language documentation lies in motivating local people to participate in it. In my field experience, this is the most difficult aspect of the documentation process as it requires expertise and skills beyond linguistics. In particular, it calls for a deep understanding of local cultures and often, local politics. Such understandings are not quickly and easily acquired by an outsider. Hence, ideally, the best people to lead documentation projects are members of the community.

While it is desirable to engage the participation of locals, it is important that this involvement be useful. In Merauke, I found that more than enough people wanted to participate in my project, mainly to receive some cash in return. However, their contributions were not useful in most cases. This matter raises the issue of the local economy and capacity in carrying out language documentation. A discussion on local socioeconomic issues in language documentation is beyond the scope of this short paper, but I briefly explain capacity here.

Becoming a contributive participant (i.e., possessing the knowledge and the skills to process data, being able to provide data as required, or being able to organize locals) demands a certain degree of capacity, which can only be developed through training and education. Thus, capacity building should be an important component of any documentation project. Considerable effort, time, and funding should be devoted to capacity building. Ideally, this process should involve more than simply training participants in how to use modern technology for language documentation; it should also cover leadership and management training, including how to take advantage of external resources. For example, it is important to have a competent local leader or group of leaders who are able to write an external funding proposal. While I am aware that in some contexts, community-based and community-managed language documentation projects

are common, in the settings where I have worked, very few members of minority language groups have the capacity to be active and contributive participant-leaders.


Overall, my prognosis is that the road ahead for the language documentation enterprise, especially pursuing the goal of enlisting active and contributive participation of local community members, will not be easy. I expect that it will remain a challenge for language documentation practitioners for years to come, at least in Indonesia. The reason is that such participation results from locals being internally motivated, both individually and collectively. This motivation, combined with capacity, plays a critical role in determining how local stakeholders, as both individuals and groups, take up the modern challenges of language attrition and endangerment and how they respond strategically to these challenges. It is precisely this link between motivation and capacity, on one hand, and strategic action, on the other hand, that is so difficult to create at the local level. Both motivation and capacity are complex, interrelated processes, which involve cognition and local culture filters that are not always accessible to non-local researchers who want to help the local stakeholders. As pointed out in my earlier article Arka (2013), the roles of cognitive and cultural filters in language maintenance and revival have been overlooked in the literature. Therefore, one way to move forward is to pay more attention to these filters by integrating them into community-based programs. A logical and fruitful step would be to recruit anthropologists and educational psychologists as part of teams working with the community on language documentation projects. This initiative only addresses one of the problems (i.e., the motivation/participation issue). The issue of foreigners leading minority language documentation projects in Indonesia (and beyond) will unfortunately remain a difficult problem to tackle.

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